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ABSTRACT

Public relations education is frequently criticized as being misdirected and incapable of imparting necessary job skills. This essay argues that contemporary public relations training overemphasizes print journalism at the expense of managerial skills and social science theory. Further, traditional justifications for journalism-based public relations are no longer valid, given the change in American channels of communication, and that nonjournalistic writing is not effectively taught by journalism instructors. The suasory nature of public relations suggests that public relations curricula would be more effectively offered through speech communication departments. Speech communication also offers instruction in other types of theory: small group, intercultural, political, organizational, and interpersonal communication. Speech departments also teach skills in addressing audiences, including persuasion; public speaking; communication research methods; writing and production for radio, television, and film; and speechwriting. While not all speech departments offer all these courses, the fact that persuasion is the heart of public relations suggests that speech communication should be considered the most suitable location for public relations education. (HTH)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION IN A TIME OF CHANGE:

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACADEMIC RELOCATION AND CURRICULUM RENOVATION

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Public relations education is frequently criticized as being misdirected, and incapable of imparting necessary job skills. This essay argues that, indeed, contemporary academic PR training overemphasizes print journalism and pays insufficient attention to managerial skills and social science theory. Additionally, traditional justifications for journalism department administration of public relations programs are shown to be unpersuasive, while modern departments of speech communication may provide the solution.

Southern Speech Communication Association Meeting, Winston-Salem, N.C., April 11-14, 1985

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Public relations education, like the weather, typically elicits considerable commentary without resulting in concrete action to foster improvement. The general public, public relations practitioners, professional associations, and educators all have castigated the contemporary status of public relations education in the United States. Despite the cacophony of criticism directed at public relations educational practices, however little standardization or substantial curriculum renovation has been accomplished.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest improvements in undergraduate public relations curricula. Specifically, this will be accomplished through consideration of three claims: (1) Many current public relations programs overemphasize journalism and neglect necessary instruction in social science theory and techniques, as well as management training; (2) traditional justifications for journalism-based PR instruction are unpersuasive, and; (3) public relations curricula might profitably be offered through modern departments of speech communication, if they offer the necessary couses.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION DEFICIENCIES

Even a cursory examination of public relations journals and textbooks reveals massive dissatisfaction with contemporary public relations education. Criticism of PR pedagogy emanates from practitioners, managers, and academics, among others. The consensus professes need for change.

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The need for public relations curriculum improvements was firmly established in 1975 by a commission comprised of educators and practitioners appointed by the Association for Education in Journalism's Public Relations Division and the Public Relations Society of America. This august panel, the Commission on Public Relations Education, issued this definitive and unencouraging conclusion; "There is urgent need for a thorough examination and review of the educational process in respect to preparing persons for the practice of public relations, and for managerial and administrative positions, so that they will have an appropriate understanding of public relations practice and its values."[1]

A 1980 survey revealed perceptions of pedagogical problems. In response to the statement, "Changes and improvements are needed in public relations education," 45.3% agreed strongly and another 46.9% expressed agreement.[2] Thus, more than 90% of these surveyed felt that PR education is currently suboptimal. Interestingly enough, because nearly 7% of the respondents indicated that they had no opinion, less than one percent of those surveyed disagreed with the need for public relations education improvements.

Similarly, another 1980 survey discovered dismay over PR education. Allen's analysis of 75 Public Relations Student Society of America advisers revealed that these educators desired "major changes in the public relations curricula for the decade ahead."[3]

Contemporary public relations textbooks also attest to the deficiencies in public relations education. Grunig and Hunt noted; "In the last few years a number of surveys of top managers have revealed strong dissatisfaction with the public relations people in their organization."[4] In fact, they offer their

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textbook to "fill the void in the training of public relations practitioners that has been identified by both top managers and public relations educators."[4]

Surveys of practitioners, educators, managers, and PRSSA advisers identify widespread unhappiness with PR training. No wonder that Files concluded in 1984 that "There appears to be consensus that changes and improvements are needed in public relations education."[6] At this point, it is necessary to consider three specific indictments of contemporary PR education.

Overemphasis on Journalism

Departments or schools of journalism are the commonplace home of contemporary public relations programs. Wright observed in 1982 that "Public relations education has experienced abundant growth in the United States in recent years, but this growth has been confined mainly to undergraduate programs in colleges, schools or departments of journalism."[7]

There is increasing concern, however, that journalism departments may not be the most appropriate academic location for PR programs. Smith referred in 1982 to a "lively ongoing debate regarding the value of training in primarily print-media skills."[8]

Bernays forcefully argued that journalism headquarters for public relations education is undesirable. He claimed that "Public relations education is hampered by too close affiliation with journalism programs and control by sometimes unsympathetic media oriented deans."[9] He continued by singling out journalism and business schools as particularly unfortunate locations for public relations programs.[10]

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It would be mistaken to allege that such critics constitute a minority. Nolte, in 1979, realized that "Many practitioners have questioned the journalistic orientation of public relations education."[11] Survey data similarly reflect disenchantment with journalistic control over public relations programs. Kalupa and Allen reported in 1982 that "A majority, 51.6% (162 respondents) strongly agreed (18.1%) or agreed (33.5%) that most schools are 'too journalistic' to meet future needs in public relations education. A large number (22.2%) offered no opinion."[12] These figures are even more impressive when one recalls that, since most curricula are currently in journalism departments, many of the respondents themselves were journalism department faculty, yet only roughly one-quarter could justify the status quo of PR education.

Recent professional association studies of public relations academic training corroborate the impressions of practitioners and educators, as well as these surveys. According to Brody, "Removal of public relations students from newswriting, editing, and reporting classes..." was "implied by the 1981 recommendations."[13] In an analogy-based summary of the case against journalism-based public relations education, Fiur scored such policies; "If press agentry and publicity originally was the whole dog, today it is only the tail. And a diminishing one at that. Yet it is still perceived as the operative appendage of the animal."[14]

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Insufficient Managerial Instruction

Partly as a result of journalistic emphasis upon the 'nuts and bolts' of press agentry and writing, other important skills, such as managerial education, have been ignored or given inadequate attention. This educational deficiency is critical, given the importance of counseling management to the public relations practitioner's tasks.

As long ago as 1960, Stephenson noted that there is "logic to the emphasis on managerial skill."[15] Stephenson's logic was confirmed by data generated by the Kalupa and Allen survey regarding future PR education needs. When asked to indicate future educational priorities, management skills training was placed ahead of education in electronic media, research techniques, internal communication, and new technology--only 'writing and English' were considered to be a higher priority by the respondents.[16]

The point is not that management skills might replace communication training, but that the former be added to the latter to produce a well-balanced curriculum. Black and Sharp asserted that "A communications management orientation is needed in which the student is thoroughly educated in the social sciences and management and familiarized with a broad range of communication knowledge."[17]

"The continued deficiency in management education" was lamented by Walker in 1982. He added that "Some practitioners have been outspoken in their opinion that public relations education is deficient in teaching management skills. Few educators will refute this."[18] Grunig and Hunt concurred in this gloomy

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assessment, claiming that "Most public relations practitioners lack managerial skills." The result, they noted, was that public relations staffers "will never rise above the entry level to become true professionals without integrating technical skills into a management framework."[19]

One public relations expert who has acquired management skills is Joseph T. Nolan, Vice-president for Public Affairs at Monsanto Company. When asked about the biggest challenges confronting PR practitioners in the future, he replied: "Gaining management's confidence by providing high-quality advice."[20] In a similar vein, when queried about future trends in public relations practice, he noted that "The most formidable challenge of the rest of the '80s is likely to be managing the new business environment."[21]

Insufficient Social Science Education

The final flaw in contemporary public relations education to be treated in this analysis is inadequate training in the social sciences. As with management training, it can be readily demonstrated that professional associations, educators, and practitioners perceive the need for more thorough instruction in the social sciences.

Monsanto's Nolan, when asked about the future of public relations education, cited "more emphasis on the social sciences such as economics, social psychology, and sociology" as being desirable.[22] The essential value of social science training to the PR professional was understood by Bernays, who contended that "The practitioner is a societal technician, applying the

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findings of the social sciences to the problem at hand. And that is what education must prepare for."[23]

Educators similarly perceive the need for greater emphasis on social science theory and technique. Grunig and Hunt, on the first page of their 1984 text, argued that "We believe the body of knowledge that is relevant to the public relations profession can be found in the social sciences."[24]

Textbook authors Black and Sharpe similarly perceived the benefits to PR students of social science studies. They remarked that "students interested in public relations should keep in mind that a strong base is needed in the social sciences to understand how man communicates, adapts to change, behaves within small groups, organizations and social structures."[25]

Survey data confirm these educated guesses regarding the desirability of enhanced curricula through social science study. Practitioners and educators polled by Kalupa and Allen opined that more instruction in this area might be necessary; "The practitioners and educators showed strong preference for more business courses and greater emphasis on social science research in the training of public relations students."[26] Significantly, "Only 3.2 percent indicated disagreement or strong disagreement with this position."[27]

These three deficiencies in public relations education are not, of course, the only ones. Educators, practitioners and professional associations appear to be in consensus that change is warranted.

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JOURNALISM-BASED PR EDUCATION IS UNJUSTIFIED

If there were compelling reasons for offering public relations programs from journalism departments, even in light of the three previously-cited deficiencies, retention of PR training in these academic niches might be reasonable. However, such is not the case. In fact, each of the three main justifications for contemporary PR education location can be demonstrated to be insufficient in the present or future.

PR was Founded by Journalists

The roots of public relations can, it must be conceded, be traced to journalists. In the United States, the first practitioners were ex-reporters. It cannot be denied that American PR was initially founded by and populated with ex-newspaper writers.

"The first practitioners were mostly journalists who moved around to the other side of their desks to create, modify, and delete editorial coverage of their new employers," Fiur noted in 1984.[28] Grunig and Hunt tacitly recognize the journalistic antecedents of public relations as the "press agent/publicity model."[29]

Does the fact that public relations functions were originally performed by ex-journalists justify continuation of public relations education from journalism departments? The answer is no for two reasons.

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Initially, this traditional justification carries an invalid assumption. Those early journalists-turned-PR practitioners themselves did not graduate from journalism degree programs. As Grunig and Hunt noted, this situation has only recently begun to change; "Even today, many, if not the majority, of practitioners have not had a formal education in public relations."[30]

In other words, while many of the original public relations professionals were ex-journalists, they were not the products of journalism departments. To a large extent, this is still true. Thus, the pioneering contributions of ex-journalists certainly are irrelevant to the question of whether journalism departments are the best academic environment for PR education.

There is another reason why a journalistic genesis fails to justify continuation of journalism-based PR education. Simply expressed, times have changed. One might recall Fiur's previously-described analogy, where he alleged that the dominance of the press over public relations practices has dissipated.

The revolution in American channels of communication has relegated traditional journalism to a position of lesser importance than in the past. Radio, television, personalized computer-assisted direct mail, film and similar media have to a great extent replaced newspapers and magazines as primary publicity avenues. Additionally, social science research techniques and the counseling and management functions of PR professionals have begun to receive more attention, yet journalism departments can claim no research or theoretical expertise in these subjects.

Clearly, even if the founding fathers of PR were graduates of journalism departments, which they were not, advances in communication technology and consumer preferences have changed things considerably. And, of course, the

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non-journalism modes of communication, which include public address and speechwriting in addition to the electronic media, are not directly within the legitimate domain of the department of journalism.

PR = Writing = Journalism

Perhaps the most frequently cited justification for administration of public relations programs from journalism departments involves the primacy of writing skills. While it should not be denied that journalism departments are the best training grounds for newspaper and magazine writers, it is the opinion of this author and others that non-journalistic writing is not effectively taught by journalism instructors.

No less a contemporary PR giant than Illinois Bell's Plank has argued that writing should be taught from journalism departments. According to Plank, journalism departments ". . . have always been the most receptive soil for nurturing the essential skill of writing."[31] Grunig and Hunt alleged a similar conclusion: "Other critical practitioners see public relations essentially as a journalistic skill and argue that students need mostly training in news writing, editing, and publication design."[32] Although there is merit in these opinions, there are two reasons to discredit the notion that journalism departments are best qualified to teach all of the types of writing required of practitioners.

Initially, it should be noted that it is no longer true that print media experience is necessary for PR practitioners. Seitel claimed in 1984 that "Today, of course, a background in the print media is not particularly

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necessary to practice public relations work."[33] The revolution in communication technology and the decline in the dominance of the print media account for this change in PR skill requirement.

A second argument against journalism department instruction in all types of writing is that there is a tremendous diversity of types of PR writing. Stephenson noted that "Journalistic writing formulas do not fit many demands of public relations writing."[34] This position was also taken by Public Relations Journal columnist Pederson, Director of Communications and Public Relations for the Public Affairs Council:

> In journalistic writing, emphasis is on the presentation of facts. In public relations writing, it is more likely to be on the promotion of an organization, an activity, a product, a personality, a policy, or a point of view. In journalism, the goal is to reveal. In public relations, it may be to obscure. In journalism, balance is sought in reporting pros and cons. In public relations, the balance may be tilted--the positive accentuated, the negative minimized if not ignored. In journalism, brevity is prized by all editors, except those serving publications of record. In public relations, detail is often insisted upon by the client or employer. In journalism, editorial comment in news stories is frowned upon In public relations, it is often inserted in an effort to explain, clarify, or "add punch."[35]

Although Pederson offers additional specific points of contrast between journalistic and public relations writing, hopefully the point has already been made. Journalism departments offer expert instruction in some types of public relations writing, but not most varieties. In fact, there are substantial dissimilarities between journalism-style and public relations-type writing.

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Journalism = Communication

A final oft-cited justification for inclusion of public relations curricula in journalism departments is the idea that journalism is communication. Apparently, some educators and practitioners equate the two, or believe that an understanding of journalism automatically imparts sufficient knowledge of all communication.

Plank referred to the "natural home" of public relations programs as being "Schools of journalism or communication," a not-uncommon phrase in the PR literature.[36] Grunig and Hunt agreed, noting that "Journalism schools . . . provide training in basic communication skills."[37] They added that "Public relations education probably will be most at home in a school of journalism--which is, most accurately, a 'school of professional communication'."[38]

Such claims are unreasonable, and typically unsupported. The most that can be said about the competence of journalism instructors to teach all communication, to paraphrase Grunig and Hunt, is that schools of journalism are schools of professional newspaper communication. Surely journalists cannot be expected to master proficiency at speechmaking, speechwriting, television, film, and other non-print communication channels. Similarly, what expertise do journalists have in communication theory of various types--persuasion, small group, interpersonal, or others?

It is also important to realize that not all journalism professors can teach PR courses; in fact, only a small percentage are so qualified. Smith

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revealed that "Many schools are finding themselves fully staffed--even over-staffed--with tenured journalism instructors, few of whom have the qualifications or desire to teach public relations courses."[39]

Although other reasons to teach journalism-oriented public relations courses can be offered, these three represent the traditional justification for such arrangements. As an ex-reporter for a daily newspaper, this author has no desire or intention to denigrate the value of journalism education to certain types of PR activities. Nevertheless, there is insufficient warrant to continue offering public relations courses from departments of journalism, in light of the negative consequences previously postulated and proven.

THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION SOLUTION

Having considered problems affecting contemporary public relations education, and bearing in mind the inadvisability of journalism-based PR curricula, one issue remains. What is the proper academic home for public relations programs? It is this author's opinion that a properly-equipped and administered department of speech communication is the proper location for such courses.

Traditionally, speech communication as a discipline has concerned itself with the theory and practice of all types of human symbolic interaction, except for print media. Scholars in this field have investigated persuasion from numerous perspectives, studying effects, ethics, variables, and a host of other

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nuances. The suasory nature of effective public relations guarantees that practitioners must understand persuasion, else they are incapable of discharging their responsibilities to clients/employers.

While there are situations in which PR professionals seek merely to provide information, and not to persuade, it is unlikely that such instances comprise more than a small percentage of all tasks performed. It cannot be denied that public relations is intended to curry public favor, sympathy and acceptance of organizational or individual interests. In some cases, PR campaigns seek more than attitude change or reinforcement, by attempting to induce or extinguish behavior. In either case, suasory intent is paramount.

In comparison, journalists seek only to inform, not persuade. Nearly all good journalists subscribe to the notion of objectivity which theoretically compels the reporter to scrupulously report both sides of the news, without bias or predisposition. Whether this doctrine works is debatable, but it remains a fundamental tenet of journalism.

Speech communication also offers instruction in other types of theory. Small group, intercultural, political, organizational and interpersonal communication are all important aspects of the totality of human communication, and are typically offered by speech communication departments. These types of communication theory courses have traditionally been acknowledged to be within the province of speech departments.

Beyond theory, speech communication programs offer important opportunities for skills development. It is common knowledge that PR professionals need to skillfully address audiences ranging from one to millions, as well as being able to prepare others to give speeches. Some of the skills taught in modern

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departments of speech communication include persuasion, public speaking, communication research methods, radio writing and production, television writing and production, filmwriting and production, and speechwriting.

Not all speech communication departments offer all of these courses. In some universities, in fact, speech departments may not be the best academic home for the PR curriculum. Nevertheless, the fact that persuasion is the heart of public relations suggests that speech communication ought to be strongly considered as the most suitable administrative location for public relations education.

CONCLUSION

The need for improvement in public relations education has been alleged so frequently that it has attained an aura of common knowledge. Practitioners, textbook authors and educators have all perceived and convincingly argued that curriculum renovation is essential.

Certain problems in historical and contemporary public relations education have been postulated, and over-emphasis upon the study of journalism as the emphasis of PR curricula has been cited as the major deficiency in public relations academic training today. A lack of managerial theory and skills education, as well as insufficient preparation for understanding social science theory and practice, has also been criticized.

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Three traditional justifications for the situation of public relations programs in journalism departments or schools have been identified. Significantly, it must be concluded that none warrant retention of PR training under the penumbra of journalistic studies.

If journalism is not the proper academic department for PR education, where should such courses be offered? It is the conviction of this author that speech communication departments, properly organized and directed, offer students the proper theoretical foundation and opportunities for skills development. Persuasion and non-suasory informative interaction constitute the heart of effective public relations, and neither journalism instructors nor anyone else outside of speech communication departments can legitimately claim intellectual or traditional lineage to such subjects.

Nothing stated in this essay is intended to denigrate the value of journalism courses to public relations students. Clear writing is still essential in the practice of public relations. However, writing for print outlets is no longer sufficient to guarantee optimal public relations. Indeed, successful PR campaigns depend upon a theoretical knowledge base and skills acquisition unobtainable from journalism educators. Until public relations curriculum planners realize the anachronistic nature of journalistically oriented PR programs, students will continue to be trained for the past.

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NOTES

[1]Commission on Public Relations Education, A Design for Public Relations Education, 1975, quoted in Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 592.

[2]Frank B. Kalupa and T. Harrell Allen, "Future Directions in Public Relations Education," Public Relations Review, (Summer, 1982), p. 35.

[3]Kalupa and Allen, p. 33.

[4]James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations, (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1984), p. vi.

[5]Grunig and Hunt, p. vii.

[6]James A Files, "Order in the House," Public Relations Journal, (March, 1984), p. 19.

[7]Donald K. Wright, "Public Relations Education and the Business Schools," Public Relations Review, (Summer, 1982), p. 11. Walker compared 1970 and 1980 survey results regarding the academic placement of public relations programs, and concluded that "The predominant home department was and is journalism." See Albert Walker, "End-of-Decade Survey Shows Academic Growth In Public Relations," Public Relations Review, (Summer, 1982), p. 46. In fact, more journalism students are interested in public relations jobs than in newspaper or magazine employment. Smith noted in 1982 that nearly 10,000 students were studying public relations as their major subject, and that "The field is the primary career option of young men and women emerging from schools of

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journalism'." See Kenneth Owler Smith, "Report of the 1981 Commission of Public Relations Education," Public Relations Review, (Summer, 1982), p. 61.

[8]Smith, p. 66.

[9]Edward L. Bernays, "Do Our Educational Facilities Meet Our Needs," Public Relations Quarterly, (Winter, 1980), p. 18.

[10]Bernays, p. 18.

[11]Lawrence W. Nolte, Fundamentals of Public Relations, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), p. 94.

[12]Kalupa and Allen, pp 36-7.

[13]E. W. Brody, "Public Relations Curricula in Transition," Public Relation Review, (Spring, 1984), p. 42.

[14]Milton Fiur, "Public Relations Faces the 21st Century," in Bill Canter, Inside Public Relations, (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 383.

[15]Howard Stephenson, ed., Handbook of Public Relations, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1960), p. 12.

[16]Kalupa and Allen, pp 38-9.

[17]Sam Black and Melvin L. Sharpe, Practical Public Relations, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Incorporated, 1983), p. 164.

[18]Albert Walker, "Public Relations Education: 1983 Survey and Report," Public Relations Review, (Spring, 1984), pp 19-41.

[19]Grunig and Hunt, p. vi.

[20]Fraser P. Seitel, The Practice of Public Relations, (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1984), pp 504-5.

[21]Seitel, p. 505.

[22]Seitel, p. 504.

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[23]Bernays, p. 18.

[24]Grunig and Hunt, p. v.

[25]Black and Sharpe, p. 164.

[26]Kalupa and Allen, p. 35.

[27]Kalupa and Allen, p. 35.

[28]Fiur, p. 283.

[29]Grunig and Hunt, p. 13.

[30]Grunig and Hunt, pp 77-8.

[31]Betsy Plank, "Making It The Best It Can Be," Public Relations Journal, (April, 1984), p. 26.

[32]Grunig and Hunt, p. 78.

[33]Seitel, p. 173.

[34]Stephenson, p. 14.

[35]Seitel, pp 149-50.

[36]Plank, p. 36.

[37]Grunig and Hunt, p. 78.

[38]Grunig and Hunt, p. 79.

[39]Smith, pp 64-5.

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